

They failed, thanks less to the robust state of civil liberties in Britain than to the fact that the author was able to show that he had used open and public sources. The fearsome Official Secrets Act has been largely outflanked by the U.S. Freedom of Information Act and the opening of once secret files in Eastern Europe (and to a lesser degree in Moscow). Moreover, by carefully cross-referencing these open sources with the published memoirs and diaries of senior politicians and civil servants and then with the crudely sanitized British cabinet papers, the careful researcher can piece together far more than the spymasters ever thought possible. After 15 years of research, Dorril, a don at the University of Huddersfield, has produced a book that amounts to a genuine breakthrough.

Naturally, the headlines were grabbed by the sensational revelations that African leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Kenneth Kaunda, and Thomas Mboya, were “agents of influence,” and that Mandela, on a recent trip to Britain, made a discreet trip to MI6 to thank the agency for its work in foiling two assassination attempts against him. (Mandela denies being an agent.) The claims of MI6 plots to kill Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, Libya’s Muammar al-Qaddafi, and Serbia’s Slobodan Milosevic also won much more publicity than the manifest incompetence of the agency in failing (like the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency) to foresee the invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 or that of Kuwait in 1990. Again like the CIA, British intelligence in the mid-1980s underestimated both the weakness of the Soviet Union and Mikhail Gorbachev’s determination to reform it.

To the historian, however, the deeper interest in Dorril’s book (apart from his impressive research methods) lies in his well-documented argument that British intelligence helped bring about the Cold War by starting hostile operations against the Soviets in 1943, almost as soon as Stalingrad had shown that the Soviet Union would survive. “Now that the tide had turned, it was in our interest to let Germany and Russia bleed each other white,” wrote Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Where possible, British intelligence and guerrilla assets recruited to fight Hitler were redirected against the Soviet threat. In Greece, MI6 even joined the Nazi occupiers in funding the right-wing *gendarmerie* to crush the procommunist guerrillas.

Not that MI6 can be held wholly to blame; Soviet intelligence had been running hostile operations against both Britain and the United States before and during the war. But it is ironic that British agents in the European communist parties were reporting by 1947 that Stalin had ordered them onto the defensive and that there was no expansionist Soviet threat. MI6 and the CIA responded with tragic attempts to roll back Soviet power, sending hundreds of brave emigrés (and a lot of old Nazi supporters) to their doom, betrayed by Soviet moles such as Kim Philby.

—Martin Walker

**SECRET MESSAGES:
*Codebreaking and American
Diplomacy, 1930–1945.***

By David Alvarez. University Press of Kansas. 292 pp. \$35

Even more than the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency (NSA) suffers from a schizophrenic attitude toward disclosure. On the one hand, even a public hint of its supersecret work intercepting and decrypting signals has always been anathema. On the other hand, success stories are vital PR for any bureaucracy dependent on congressional funding. In 1996 the proponents of disclosure briefly gained the upper hand, and NSA declassified some 5,000 files on America’s code-breaking activities during World War II. (If you’ve got to have a success story, it’s hard to beat World War II.) Pieces of the story had come out earlier, but many gaps remained.

In this lucid, comprehensive, and frequently entertaining account, Alvarez, a professor of politics at St. Mary’s College in California, helps fill two of the largest gaps. One is the human story of decoding hundreds of thousands of messages a month sent by enemies, neutrals, and allies alike. The new archival records and other sources (including declassified NSA oral histories and the author’s own interviews with veterans) permit the first reconstruction of day-to-day life at Arlington Hall, the U.S. Army’s wartime code-breaking headquarters in Arlington, Virginia—the mind-boggling work, the frustrations, the strokes of incredible luck, and the cast of extraordinary characters, including the cryptanalyst who sat with his feet in a wastebasket to protect himself from the imagined ill effects of drafty offices.

The other gap Alvarez fills is the effect of this intelligence on American foreign policy

and diplomacy. Code-breaking had an undeniable impact on military operations, but, before the 1996 releases, relatively little was known about Arlington Hall's work on foreign diplomatic traffic. Alvarez's surprising yet convincing conclusion is that the effect of this work was slight: The Allies' policy of unconditional surrender, combined with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's expectation that he could carry foreign leaders with him "through the exercise of will and persuasive charm," undercut the influence of signals intelligence in top policy circles.

Despite this admittedly disappointing conclusion, Alvarez tells a classic tale of secret agencies and intrigue. The army, bringing in some very unmilitary people to get the job done, emerges as a bureaucratic hero. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, it commissioned Alfred McCormack, a prominent New York lawyer with a tough legal mind, to shake up its intelligence system. McCormack created a new Special Branch within Arlington Hall to sift and analyze the code breakers' output and ensure that it at least reached top officials throughout the government. He filled the Special Branch with so many high-powered lawyers that people in the War Department began calling it the best law office in Washington.

In one of the book's most telling anecdotes, code breaker William Lutwiniak finds himself facing the prospect of being drafted after Pearl Harbor. His boss, Captain Harold Hayes, tells him to go to the army recruiting station and enlist. There, Lutwiniak is sworn in as a private and handed his orders: Report to Captain Harold Hayes for active duty. Back at Arlington Hall, Lutwiniak goes to see the captain, who promotes him on the spot to sergeant and tells him to get back to work and not to worry about basic training. There are lessons here for today's very bureaucratic intelligence bureaucracy.

—Stephen Budiansky

MEMOIR:

My Life and Themes.

By Conor Cruise O'Brien. Cooper Square. 460 pp. \$30

In an earlier age, Conor Cruise O'Brien would have been an ambassador for the Holy Roman Empire, or a Celtic princeling seeking adventure in the service of the Byzantines. As a diplomat with both the Irish foreign service and

the United Nations (including a harrowing period in the Congo as a close adviser to Dag Hammarskjöld during the 1960s), a university administrator in Ghana, a New York University professor during the student protests, a newspaper editor, and a legislator, O'Brien has participated in many of the major political debates of the last half-century. Along the way, he has written some two dozen books, including volumes on Edmund Burke, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Camus, Ireland, Israel, and the French Revolution. Now he takes as his subject his own extraordinary public life.

Nationalism and religion have been his abiding concerns, with roots running deep in his background and the tortuous history of Irish politics. His family had ties both to the United Kingdom, where his grandfather sat in the House of Commons, and to the quest for an independent Ireland, in which an uncle was killed. He recounts the family experiences that influenced his early thinking about "the Irish question," as well as his later, hands-on role in trying to deal with it: He served in the Dáil, the Irish legislature, and as a minister for the Labor government, rousing the ire of Sinn Fein more than once.

If some family connections pushed him toward Irish nationalism, his early rejection of Catholicism and his education at secular or Protestant schools made his way difficult in a country where politics and faith are tightly joined. This conflict sharpened when he began to express the view that those attempting to incorporate Northern Ireland were ignoring the wishes of its inhabitants and, in the process, echoing what the British had done in the first place.

Ireland looms large in this book, both in its own right and as a template for examining the connections between religion and politics. Unfortunately, the author never explains how his philosophy has developed. While he implies that he has been consistent, the liberal Conor Cruise O'Brien of 1961 is not the same man who now calls himself a Burkean, and who has devoted much of his recent work to defending the "moderate Enlightenment" against what he considers religious or political extremism. Had he given a fuller account of that intellectual evolution, coupled with this engrossing life, he would have more completely supplied the themes promised in the title.

—Gerald J. Russello